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ABSTRACT

This review examines the various undergraduate study abroad programs and the problems involved in evaluating the programs for the granting of transfer credits. The five major factors influencing the credit evaluation decision are enumerated, and their importance is discussed. (MML)

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A REVIEW OF PROBLEMS CONCERNING THE GRANTING OF TRANSFER OF CREDIT FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

James S. Frey

According to one source (the World Studies Data Bank of the Academy for Educational Development), 50,540 American students were enrolled in 3,825 study abroad programs in 1971-72.[1] There is little agreement today on whether the number of students studying abroad is decreasing, increasing, or holding steady. However, whatever the accurate current statistics might be, study abroad continues to be an important part of undergraduate education for a considerable number of American students.

Study abroad programs can be divided into four basic types: home, guest, foreign, and agency.

1. A home program is one which is sponsored by a regionally accredited U.S. college or university for its own students. I call this a "home" program because it is sponsored by the student's "home" institution. The University of Delaware established the first such program in 1923.[2]
2. A guest program is one which is sponsored by a regionally accredited U.S. college or university for its own students, but which is open to students from other institutions as well. I call this a "guest" program because the students are visitors or "guests" of the sponsoring institution for the duration of the program. (It follows that one program could be described in two ways: "home," because it is designed by the sponsoring institution for its own students, and "guest," because it is open to students from other institutions as well. When-

[1] "Fewer Studying Abroad, But Interest Holds Up," The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 12, 1976, p. 6.

[2] Comments by Dean C. Lomis, Foreign Student Advisor, University of Delaware, to the author on December 5, 1974.

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ever a program fits both descriptions, I give it the "guest" label).

I don't know which was the first guest program. Perhaps the University of Delaware pioneered here too. At any rate, today most of the home programs are guest programs too. There were approximately 600 programs of this type in 1967.[3]

3. A foreign program is one which is sponsored by a foreign degree-granting university. (Here I am speaking about short-term study abroad programs of one year or less, and not of regular enrollment as a degree-seeking student.) A foreign program tends to be language-oriented, although that is not always the case. I don't know how many foreign programs exist, perhaps several hundred. Most of them are found in Western Europe, but there are some in countries such as Japan as well.

4. Agency programs are those which are sponsored by an organization or agency which is itself neither regionally accredited in the United States nor recognized as degree-granting by the Ministry of Education of the country in which it operates. The Institute of European Studies program in Vienna was probably the first program of this type. In 1974, I counted 237 of them, but there probably are many more.

Needless to say, there is little consistency in the credit reporting procedures which are followed by this vast array of undergraduate study abroad programs. Much of the information which is presented to admissions officers and registrars does not fit the standards which most academic institutions follow when determining transfer of credit, and this frequently leads to misunderstandings, confusion, and arbitrary decisions.

There are five major factors which are typically involved in any decision concerning the granting of transfer of credit: accreditation, credits, grades, course content, and course descriptions. They are usually reviewed in that order.

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[3]Allan O. Pfnister, "Study Abroad: Report of an Accrediting Team," paper delivered at the annual conference of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers in Los Angeles on April 18, 1972, p. 2.

1. The first major factor is accreditation, i.e., is the credit-granting institution either accredited by a U.S. regional accrediting association or recognized as a degree-granting institution by the Ministry of Education of the country in which it is located? If the answer to this question is "yes," credits earned can be considered for transfer, subject to the additional factors noted below. If the answer is "no," alternate evidence of quality control needs to be found.

When academic records from non-accredited U.S. institutions are received, one generally investigates the policies concerning the subject institution which are followed by accredited institutions located in the same state. The annual report of Credit Given published by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) is one source of information in this regard. Telephone calls, letters, and conversations at professional conferences are other common sources of information. The basic theory is that an accredited institution located near the subject institution has more and better opportunities to review the quality of the academic program, and that its policies are better guides for action than a decision made on more arbitrary grounds.

When academic records from a non-accredited study abroad institution are received, one is dealing with either a foreign program or an agency program (since by definition both home and guest programs are regionally accredited). Foreign programs are no problem, since Ministry of Education degree-granting approval can be considered to be tantamount to accreditation. Agency programs, on the other hand, are a serious problem. They have not passed through the minimal quality review process represented by regional accreditation in the U.S. or Ministry of Education approval in other countries. In the case of U.S.-based agencies, accredited institutions located in the same state as the agency's headquarters almost always differ on the acceptability of credit.

It is even more impossible to identify a consensus policy for foreign-based agencies.

Admissions officers and registrars, however, need to make a decision on some rational basis, and so one of the following policies is usually adopted:

a) We do (or do not) grant credit for this program because we always have (or have not) done so. I call this the "consistency" policy.

b) We will (or will not) grant credit for this program because Indiana University (or St. Mary's College) does (or does not) do so. I call this the "buddy" policy.

c) We will grant credit for this program because anything which gets the student out of Indiana is good (or we will not grant credit for this program because we do not recognize any program which is not accredited). I call these the "heart" and "club" policies. ("Club" refers to the implied existence of an exclusive group, or club, of accredited members. "Heart" seems to be an appropriate label for the opposite viewpoint because that policy seems to be based less on faith and hope and more on charity. "Heart" and "club" are also quite appropriate because these policies depend to a great extent on the laws of probability.)

The problem with these "solutions," of course, is that there is frequently little evidence of the reasons on which the original positive or negative model decision was based. The end result is a decision which cannot really be defended, except on purely bureaucratic terms, particularly if it is negative (and seldom on academic terms, particularly if it is positive).

As a result of such arbitrary decisions by admissions officers and registrars, study abroad advisors frequently steer students toward "safe" accredited programs, regardless of quality, and away from problematic agency programs, no matter how good they might appear to be.

After a few years employment at institutions which follow the "club" policy, reading reams of study abroad propaganda, and working with several hundred study abroad program transcripts, I began to be aware that a number of "club" members were sponsoring study abroad programs which had significant academic deficiencies, and which probably do not really merit transfer of credit. Similarly, I began to uncover a number of agency programs which appeared to be very good, and which probably are worthy of credit recognition. I was therefore rather frustrated when discussions on study abroad at the AACRAO conference in St. Louis in April 1971, and at the annual conference of the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA) in Vancouver in May 1971 seemed to endorse the "club" rule. In a partly serious, partly tongue-in-cheek attempt at focusing attention on other types of programs, I suggested a mathematical formula for granting credit for non-club (primarily agency) programs, a formula which I had just worked out on a piece of scrap paper. I was amazed when the formula was eagerly accepted by many of those who were present at that NAFSA session. More than a dozen persons approached me later to be sure they had noted the formula correctly!

This experience convinced me that the problems involved in reviewing agency programs necessitated more serious attention, and thus it became the topic of my doctoral dissertation, an undertaking with which some of you are already familiar. The evaluation model which resulted has been reported to the l[illegible] persons who participated in the project, and a brief summary will appear in the Fall 1976 issue of International Educational and Cultural EXCHANGE, the journal of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State. The Study Abroad by U.S. Students Committee (SAUSS) of AACRAO and the Section on U.S. Students Abroad (SECUSSA) of NAFSA are jointly working with the model, and a trial application will be made in December, with the cooperation of the Institute of European Studies. If this model works, we

hopefully will have an alternate solution to the accreditation problem which can stand both academic and bureaucratic scrutiny.

2. The second major factor which is typically involved in any decision concerning the granting of transfer of credit is credits. Most academic institutions define a semester hour of credit as one hour of class per week for 15 weeks, or any other combination of formal instruction which totals 15 hours, with half-credit granted for laboratory instruction and one-third credit granted in studio art and music courses. There are variations on this theme, including 16 and 18 week semesters and slight differences in art, music, and introductory language courses. Trimester and quarter system institutions have similar basic definitions for their units of credit.

   At most institutions, there is a general limit of one credit for each week of instruction. Thus 15 credits is the normal full-time load for a 15-week semester (16 for a 16-week semester, etc.), and 4 credits or 6 credits or 8 credits is the normal full-time load for a 4-week or 6-week or 8-week interim or summer term. (In some special cases, such as intensive language programs, where an unusually large number of hours are spent in an intensive study program, the credit-a-week policy usually does not apply. However, the program has to be identifiable as intensive).

   Credit values are a problem whenever a study abroad program's grade report lists an exceptionally large number of credits, such as one program in France which reported for 1975-76 26 credits for the first semester and 24 for the second, plus 1 credit of audit in each term. There have also been instances of summer programs which granted 8 or more credits for only 3 or 4 weeks of enrollment. This is particularly problematic if the program has been "hosted" by seven universities in five countries during the three weeks!

   If the total number of credits which is granted by a study abroad program exceeds by a substantial margin the normal full-time load at the receiving

institution for the same period of time, standard record-keeping policies at most institutions require that credit for the courses be reduced proportionally, so that a more realistic total number of credits will be involved. There are a variety of standard and home-made formulas which can be used in this process (e.g., multiplying by 2/3 or 3/4 or 4/5).

3. The third major factor involved in transfer of credit is grades. Most academic institutions require a grade of C or better for each course for which credit is to be transferred. A small number of institutions will also accept D grades if they are matched by at least an equivalent number of A and B grades.

   Grades are usually only a small concern in the transfer of credit process when study abroad programs are involved. Few programs award D and F grades with any frequency, even when the admissions process has been non-selective. I suspect that low grades would have too negative an effect on recruiting. Sometimes it appears that the program director is secretly charged with the task of raising grades during the transcript preparation process. At any rate, very few study abroad programs publish their grade conversion tables (e.g., a German gut is a B, a French passable is a C), and the admissions officer or registrar usually sees only A, B, and C grades.

4. The fourth major factor involved in transfer of credit is content. The academic content of courses accepted for transfer of credit must be compatible with the degree requirements of the receiving institution. For example: technical engineering credits are seldom accepted by a liberal arts college. However, liberal arts credits are almost always accepted by professional colleges, subject only to a maximum limit on the number of acceptable general education and elective courses. The content of study abroad courses is seldom a problem, since the vast majority are liberal arts in nature.

5. The fifth major factor in transfer of credit is description. The title of each

course listed on a grade report must be as self-explanatory as possible. In addition, the bulletin or catalog or syllabus or other written material which describes an academic program must contain a description of each course which is sufficiently clear and detailed to permit comparison with courses offered by the receiving institution. Most study abroad programs do not adequately meet this requirement.

When a specific study abroad course is substantially the same as a course offered by the receiving institution, a student will be given credit for that course. Thus, a student who has completed a course entitled "Physics H360 Descriptive Astronomy" in the study abroad program of the University of Evansville in England will receive credit for "Astronomy A100 The Solar System" at Indiana University. The titles are different, and so are the course numbers, but the catalog descriptions indicate that the content is the same (theoretically, at least).

Most institutions have a mechanism for accepting courses which were completed at a recognized institution, and whose content is relevant, but for which there is no equivalent course at the receiving institution. At Indiana University, the abbreviation "UNDI" is substituted for the course number. This abbreviation stands for "undistributed" or "undesignated," and means that the course is acceptable but it does not compare with any which the University offers. Thus a student who completed a course entitled "Sociology H206 Social Institutions of Britain" at the University of Evansville program in England would receive credit at Indiana Universtiy in "Sociology UNDI British Social Institutions."

Credit accepted as UNDI automatically counts toward graduation. It may or may not count toward the requirements for a major, or for specific general distribution requirements; the major department and the dean of the college,

respectively, have veto power in this regard. In most cases, the courses are counted. Study abroad programs frequently cause problems in the area of course description. This is particularly true of guest programs (i.e., programs which are sponsored by regionally accredited colleges and universities for their own students but which are open to students from other institutions as well). For example: a state university in the midwest sponsors a study abroad program in France via an agency program which operates in France. The state university admitted to this program a guest student from another institution, also located in the midwest. During the 1976 spring term, the guest student took five courses which are described in the agency's catalog as follows:

French 102 Basic French Grammar & Composition	3 Credits
French 112 Travaux Pratiques	4 Credits
Education 302 Comparative European Education	3 Credits
Fine Arts 304 European Art, 16th Cen to Present	3 Credits
Psychology 302 Child Psychology	3 Credits

for a total of 16 credits for the 15-week program. This was a reasonable schedule, and all of the courses are clearly titled. In most instances, this would not be a problem case. However, because this (theoretically at least) was a guest program, not an agency program, the student's record was reported by the state university (the program sponsor), not by the agency which taught the courses. The courses were reported by the university as follows:

French FLFR 103Z Elem French (Accel)	5 Credits
Foreign Language FLST 381Z Spec Studies Lang I	3 Credits
Education 426IPZ Wksp in Education	3 Credits
Art 485ZP Studies in Art Hist	3 Credits
IDSP 401N Foreign Studies Prog	3 Credits

The titles of these five courses do not describe the nature of the academic work which was completed. According to the program sponsor's bulletin, "Elem French

(Accel)" is a special accelerated course for those who are not ready for intermediate work. According to the agency's bulletin, "Basic French" (the course which the student actually took) is the second course in a two-semester introductory sequence; no "acceleration" is involved. In addition, the agency (which taught the course) granted 3 credits for it, whereas the program sponsor reported 5.

Similarly, "Travaux Pratiques" provides intensive oral-aural French practice at the beginning level. It is a first-year course, according to the agency, but the sponsor reported it as a junior-level course. "Comparative European Education" is a regular lecture course, but it was reported as a workshop. "European Art, 16th Century to Present" bears little similarity to "20th Century Art." In addition, the student received a grade of P on a pass/fail basis, but the university reported a grade of B. And "Child Psychology" is a special psychology course for prospective teachers and psychologists, a fact which is not conveyed by the title "Foreign Studies Prog."

This type of academic record keeping is, in my view, totally unacceptable. Nevertheless, most guest programs indulge in it. When such matters are called to the attention of study abroad program staff, they are very rarely interested.

One solution to this problem, when a dual guest/agency program is involved, is for the admissions officer or registrar to ignore the guest program, and to grant transfer of credit on the basis of the record provided by the agency. This doesn't work when the receiving institution does not recognize the agency as a creditworthy sponsor, as was true in the case described above.

There are a number of other problem areas concerning transfer of credit for which study abroad programs are responsible. I call them the "veneer," the "shell game," and the "pigeon drop."

1. The "veneer" - or "what constitutes sponsorship?"

For example: There is an agency headquartered in New England which offers

a variety of study abroad programs in a number of countries. A regionally accredited private university on the west coast sponsors relatively few study abroad programs. However, the private university will sponsor, and grant credit for, any program offered by the New England agency, provided that students send to the university a copy of their high school transcript or proof of acceptance to a four-year institution at the same time that they send registration materials and money to the agency. There does not appear to be any involvement on the part of the university in the design of the agency's courses, the selection of its faculty, the admission of its students, or any other facet of its operation.

Similarly, there is an agency headquartered in England ("old" England, in this case) which operates during the summer in space rented from a prestigious British institution and which offers a variety of courses "on the American pattern" for undergraduate American students. All courses are specially designed for American students, taught by faculty hired by the agency. A state university in the midwest "sponsors" this program, and will grant credit to any student who forwards the check for tuition to the university rather than to the agency. Except for transferring funds from the United States to England, and typing credits on its transcript form, the university appears to have no involvement in the operation of this program. ¶ These kinds of sponsorship do not seem to me to be defensible. However, I have not noted any outcry from those who are involved in administering study abroad programs at institutions which follow more traditional patterns of academic development and review.

2. The "shell game," or "under whose umbrella does the program hide?"

For example: A western university sponsored a program in Europe during the summer of 1975. It organized the courses, which are described in its catalog, supervised the selection of the professors, and in general retained control of all of the academic aspects of the program. An agency, one headquartered in

the United States but which has a program of its own in Europe, administered the business aspects of the program for the university, collecting fees, arranging for housing, and hiring, supervising, and paying the professors. The agency did not sponsor the program, in an academic sense, and the courses which were offered were not described in any of the agency's publications. However, the agency issued the transcript of grades because the university could not do so, because the university had collected no tuition for the courses involved.

A home student was enrolled in this program, and there would normally have been no problem. However, she transferred to another university. How does that institution handle her request for transfer of credit? By making a decision on the basis of its policy toward the university, in whose catalog the courses are described, but from which no transcript is forthcoming? Or by making a decision on the basis of its policy toward the agency, on whose transcript form the courses, credits and grades are reported, even though the agency's publications make no mention of this program because the agency did not "sponsor" it? Which one really awarded the credits for which transfer has been requested?

Similarly, a midwestern university sponsors a summer program in England, using the facilities of a prestigious British institution. The university designs the courses, supervises the faculty, admits the students, collects the tuition, and has a resident director at the site. The Department for External Studies of the British institution teaches and tutors the courses, somewhat uncomfortably because of constraints imposed by the university's minimum contact hours rule.

Three rather distinctive sections are offered in this program, and each student chooses one section. The sections are:

Age of Shakespeare

England From 1760 to 1840

Contemporary Britain: 1920 to the Present

Each section consists of three courses: One each in English, History, and either Music, or Art, or Architecture. Students who register in this program on a home basis receive 15 quarter credits when they return: 5 for each course. The course titles which appear on the university's transcript are "English 594 Group Studies," "History 694 Group Studies," and "Music or Art or Architecture 694 Group Studies," no matter which of the three considerably different sections was involved. Should a student transfer to another institution at a later date, it is impossible for an admissions officer or registrar to determine how to equate these courses to courses offered by the receiving institution. (You may recognize this dilemma as one more instance of imprecise course descriptions, a problem which has already been noted above.)

If a student enrolls in this program on a guest basis, the university issues no transcript. Instead, the British institution's Department of External Studies issues a memorandum briefly summarizing what the sponsoring university would have done if this had been a home student, and reporting the name of the section involved and the grade which was earned. There are only two grades possible: "outstanding" and "incomplete or unsatisfactory." The receiving institution is faced with a choice of accepting zero credit from the sponsoring university (because it awarded zero credit), or of granting transfer of credit on the basis of a memorandum from a non-degree-granting division of a British institution which does not otherwise function during the summer.

3. The "pigeon drop," or "guess who's holding the bag?"

A variety of organizations offer special study abroad tour programs for adults, particularly for elementary and secondary school teachers. Several U.S. institutions grant credit for these programs, frequently at the graduate level. In many cases, this credit will not be accepted by the granting institution toward its own degrees. In reality, the granting institutions themselves generally

regard such credits as continuing education units (CEU), rather than academic credits. However, other academic institutions, and employers, who receive transcripts reporting such credit, are unaware that a tour was involved and that the granting institution won't accept the credit which it has granted. Such chicanery would never be permitted if the work occurred in the United States; I see no reason why it is tolerated when study abroad is involved.

In summary, it can be said that study abroad programs cause frequent problems for admissions officers and registrars who have to make transfer of credit decisions. Some of these problems result from the lack of accreditation of program sponsors, a situation for which there is no reliable solution available at the present time, but concerning which some progress is being made. Many of the problems, however, result from inflated credit values, imprecise and even incorrect course titles, nominal (perhaps I should say synthetic) sponsorship, transvestite transcripts, and administrative double standards. These problems are both intolerable and correctable. It is my hope that those who are really convinced of the value of undergraduate study abroad will soon undertake to resolve them.